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How a Skeptical Foundationalist Might Respond to Peter Klein

Maximillian M. Muller

At least one understanding of infinitism is that it is the only viable theory of justification because it avoids the pitfalls of arbitrariness and circularity, which foundationalism and coherentism endorse. Such a view is held by Peter Klein. Others such as Scott Aikin have put forward means of accepting certain kinds of impure foundationalism and impure infinitism that are compatible¹. Here I am going to address Klein's contention, though Aikin has already put forth good reasons for rejecting Klein's view, he does not address exactly the same topic as that which I will address. My primary thesis is that the kind of arbitrariness, which certain kinds of foundationalism endorse are not bad, and that this kind of foundationalism is an acceptable structure of justification.

Summary of Klein's view

The basic idea behind Klein's view is that there are two strongly intuitive principles that delimit rational beliefs. The first is the principle of avoiding circularity (PAC) and the second is the principle of avoiding arbitrariness (PAA). The two principles are as follows:

¹ Aikin, Scott F. 2008. "Meta-Epistemology and the varieties of epistemic infinitism" *Synthese* no. 163:175-185.

PAC: For all x , if a person, S , has a justification for x , then for all y , if y is in the evidential ancestry of x for S , then x is not in the evidential ancestry of y for S ².

PAA: For all x , if a person, S , has a justification for x , then there is some reason, r^1 , available to S for x ; and there is some reason, r^2 , available to S for r^1 ; etc³.

Specifications concerning availability aside, Klein believes that holding these two principles necessarily entails that the structure of justification must be one of infinite and non-repeating reasons. Here's Klein's argument:

Klein's Positive Argument for Infinitism

1. PAC: For all x , if a person, S , has a justification for x , then for all y , if y is in the evidential ancestry of x for S , then x is not in the evidential ancestry for y .
2. PAA: For all x , if a person, S , has a justification for x , then there is some reason, r^1 , available to S for x ; and there is some reason, r^2 , available to S for r^1 ; etc.
3. If we have justification for some x , then there must be an infinite and non-repeating number of available reasons. (1, 2)
4. We have justification.
5. \therefore There are an infinite and non-repeating number of available reasons. (1, 3 MP)

The conclusion of this argument, 5 is the infinitist claim. It is what I am going to dispute from a skeptical foundationalist point of view. There are only three ways of challenging

² Klein 298

³ Klein 299

this argument, deny or alter 1 or 2, or deny 4. Premise 3 follows directly from 1 and 2, and 5 follows via modus ponens from 3 and 4. The argument is obviously valid, and intuitively strong. For anyone but a strong skeptic (who could deny 4, that we have justification), the only options are denying or altering PAC or PAA. My endeavor is to analyze PAA, and attain a different understanding of arbitrariness that is i) consistent with a certain kind of foundationalism, and ii) does not necessitate the infinitist's conclusion that there are an infinite and non-repeating number of available⁴ reasons. My altered understanding of arbitrariness will be such that 3 does not follow from 1 and 2.

Criticism of PAA

Klein claims that PAA has great intuitive plausibility, but as it is stated, I don't see it. Klein considers PAA to be bad in all cases. First, I would like to challenge the initial plausibility of Klein's understanding of arbitrariness. Second, I am going to postulate an obviously unacceptable kind of arbitrariness that lines-up more closely with our common intuition that a certain kind of arbitrariness is bad.

If I were asked to define arbitrariness out of the blue, I would probably not include the term "available" nor would I instantly agree that all forms of arbitrariness are bad. In fact, almost all self-conscious foundationalists, and most non-philosophers, would probably agree that for some things, there simply are no reasons. I agree that the principle Klein stated above is plausible, but I by no means think it is plausible to the

⁴ Klein gives a summary account of availability, however it is not so important for my objections. The primary point concerning availability, which I will discuss later, is that there is a distinct possibility that there are not an infinite number of available beliefs to justify certain propositions.

extent he would hope. Rather than look at this principle as a universal intuitive notion, it is better to look at it for what it is – a theoretical definition.

Comparing it with Klein's treatment of circularity, I think he has it right in saying that circularity, regardless of the size or difficulty of seeing that some reasoning is circular is faulty⁵. If we asked the average reasoner in our whereabouts whether she thought a particular circular argument were acceptable or not, she would probably say that it was not. Similarly if I asked the average reasoner the question "is it okay to just believe something without any reason at all?" She would probably say "no." Now, if I asked her whether she has a reason to believe that she just heard a sound (from my asking the question) or not, she would also say "no." There is an apparent contradict here. My interlocutor asserts both that "it is not okay to just believe something without a reason" and "that it is okay to believe that she heard a sound without a reason." Depending on her character and her disposition to philosophy, she will do one of two things. She might get frustrated and quit the scene, or admit that there is some relevant difference⁶ between believing that she heard a sound and believing something for no reason at all that allows her to be justified in believing that she heard a sound, but not in believing something for no reason at all.

There is a relevant and important difference in the popular responses elicited regarding circularity and arbitrariness. Klein himself often makes use of more colloquial definitions of arbitrariness. In the introduction to the very same paper from which PAA is taken Klein writes "[an arbitrary reason] is a reason for which there are no further

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⁶ I am not advocating foundationalism yet with this example, it is just what I would genuinely expect a person might say in these situations. The point of the illustration is only to illuminate what kind of arbitrariness is intuitively strong, and which isn't.

reasons making it even slightly better to accept than any of its contraries⁷.” This is what I would dub a highly intuitive claim, but it is not the precise definition Klein gives in PAA. It is in need of greater specification. To see what is intuitive about arbitrariness, and whether foundationalism is arbitrary in a bad way or not, an analysis of arbitrariness is required. I am not going to present a full analysis here, but I am going to postulate two alternative kinds of arbitrariness that are more consistent with these intuitions. One of these arbitrarinesses is bad, contrastive arbitrariness, and the other is acceptable, simple arbitrariness. These two kinds of arbitrariness and their normative attachments are consistent with a kind of foundationalism, and do not necessitate the infinitist conclusion.

Contrastive Arbitrariness:

If S holds some proposition *x* over some other proposition *y*, of which S is aware, and there are better reasons to believe *y* rather than *x*, S’s holding *x* is contrastively arbitrary.

This is a minimalist kind of arbitrariness in that it is very obviously unacceptable. It serves to exclude the majority of cases of bad reasoning due to arbitrariness that we would commonly identify. This definition of arbitrariness is limited in that it does not exclude enough instances of bad reasoning due to arbitrariness. For an entirely adequate definition of arbitrariness, a full analysis of arbitrariness and a lot of Chisholming would be required. It is enough for the purposes of this paper that contrastive arbitrariness is i) a highly intuitive definition of arbitrariness that ii) captures

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most cases of bad reasoning that we would call arbitrary and iii) does not include any instances of what might be considered good reasoning. I see no grounds for believing that this kind of arbitrariness is acceptable. It is on these grounds that contrastive arbitrariness is going to replace Klein's definition of arbitrariness, as the standard for something we should definitely reject.

A further contention with PAA is the lack of specificity with regard to what counts as a reason. It seems that there are very different kinds of reasons we might give to justify our beliefs. As this is the case, then there may be certain kinds of beliefs such that if *there are no further reasons for them*, they might still be acceptable. I identify at least two kinds of reasons, reasons to believe and truth-making reasons. Of course every truth-making reason is a reason to believe, but not every reason to believe is truth-making. One kind of arbitrariness we can identify then, is a belief for which there are no truth-making reasons. This is simple arbitrariness, and it is an acceptable kind of arbitrariness.

Simple Arbitrariness:

If for some proposition *x*, there are no reasons that make it true, then it is simply arbitrary.

The distinction between truth-making reasons and reasons to believe can be demonstrated fairly easily. Prudential reasons and probabilistic reasons (though perhaps "truth conducive") are reasons to believe, but they do not make other propositions true. That my belief *that I will survive cancer* is prudential is a reason to

believe that I will survive cancer, but it is not a reason that if true, would make it true that I will survive cancer⁸. The above definition of simple arbitrariness is not too distinct from common intuitions of what kind of arbitrariness is acceptable. Remember that when we examined the intuitions of acceptable and unacceptable arbitrariness, it seemed that some propositions simply do not have reasons, and that some of those are acceptable beliefs. I assert that simple arbitrariness is acceptable under certain conditions, and in fact it is a necessary condition for being a foundational belief.

The Basic Argument for a Foundational Belief

Unfortunately, just as the case was in regards to arbitrariness, I am not going to present a full account of the conditions for foundational beliefs, or a lengthy defense thereof. I am simply going to hint at one set of conditions that gives us at least one foundational belief. There may be different sets of necessary conditions for various kinds of foundational beliefs, but I am only going to focus on one set here.

A belief is foundational if:

- a. It is simply arbitrary (there are no reasons that make it true).
- b. It is epistemic.

I am not going to give a positive account of truth-making reasons here. Rather, I am going to leave it to examples of what I think are truth making reasons to show what it is.

For example a truth making reason might be something like if the sun exists, then there

⁸ Hope might be truth-conducive i.e. believing that I will survive might help me survive but it is not necessarily true in all cases that if I believe that I will survive, I will survive.

is light. The sun existing is a truth making reason for their being light. In order for something to be shown not-foundational, one must show that there are truth making reasons for it. The second condition, *that it is epistratic*, has a very specific meaning. It is taken from “epistrophe”, which is a combination of the Greek term for “return,” and “stratic” for levels. What I mean by it is that the epistratic belief is *employed* or *presumed* on all levels of justification. So some belief *b* is epistratic, if there is some meta-justification *M* for *b*, *that b is foundational* (satisfies 1 and 2), then *b* is being pre-supposed or employed in that meta-justification *M*.

There is a circularity concern when it comes to epistratism. However, this is easily dismissed. It is not that the epistratic belief is employed in the evidential ancestry for *x*, but that it is a necessary condition for any given reason to believe that *x*, thus the belief is employed and assumed, but it is not itself a justification for *x*.

An instance of bad circularity, where *x* is employed in its own evidential ancestry would be one such as this:

1. She loves me.
2. Everything someone in love says is true.
3. She says that she loves me.
4. Therefore, she loves me.

In this case, where 1, 2 and 3 are considered justifying reasons for 4, the chain is viciously circular. Line 1 already states “that she loves me.” The belief being justified (4) is already used in the evidential ancestry of 4. I will give an example of a foundational

belief (and thus an epistemic belief) in the following section, and point out exactly why this is not circular.

Extension: One Foundational Belief

It is perfectly possible that there are no such beliefs, that count as foundational. I am going to give one that fits all of the necessary conditions for being a foundational belief, and show that I am justified in believing that it is foundational without losing the belief as foundational.

1. A belief is foundational iff:
 - a. There are no reasons that make it true.
 - b. It is epistemic:
 - i. A belief is epistemic if for some belief *b*, for any reason *m* given for *b*, *m* employs or assumes *b*.
2. If *S* is not contrastively arbitrary in believing that *b* is foundational, then *S* is justified in believing *b*.
3. If *S* holds some belief *x* over some other belief *y*, of which *S* is aware, and there are better reasons to believe *y* than *x*, *S*'s holding *x* is contrastively arbitrary and unacceptable.

These are the conditions required to be justified in believing some *b*, and believing that it is foundational. If I have better reasons to believe that *b* i) has no reasons to make it true, and ii) that *b* is employed or assumed in any reason given for *b*.

Now for the example, the Law of Non-Contradiction (L) is a justified foundational belief. There are no reasons that make the law of non-contradiction true. Here's an argument to accept L.

1. If the law of non-contradiction were false, then there would be no intelligible distinction between ideas.
2. There is an intelligible distinction between ideas.
3. Therefore, the law of non-contradiction is true. (MP)

Why is premise 2 not a truth making reason for the law of non-contradiction? Because it is not independent or prior to the law of non-contradiction. Furthermore, both 1 and 2 rely upon the truth of the law of non-contradiction⁹. If there were no intelligible distinction between ideas, then 1 would and would not be intelligibly distinct from 2 and 3, nor would it be intelligibly distinct from any other proposition for that matter. The conclusion would be true, false and neither true nor false. One and two are not independent of the truth of the conclusion. If the antecedent of 1 is assumed, then 1 and 2 can be given and 3 can follow and might not. Given this explosive environment, where non-contradiction is not assumed, no reasons can *really* be given for L because no inferences can be made at all.

Another way of stating it is that it is not logically possible to deny L, because the definition of logical possibility is simply non-contradiction, so if there is no L then there is no logical possibility. Thus, we cannot even make a judgment about the possibility of the

⁹ But note, that this is not viciously circular. The law of non-contradiction is not being used in the evidential ancestry for itself. It is being assumed, but not states as a reason for itself.

law of non-contradiction without pre-supposing it in giving our definition of logical possibility. Thus, logical possibility is not prior to L, and cannot be given as a *reason for it* because it is not independent of the truth of the law itself.

Addressing the contrastive arbitrariness point, I have better reasons to believe that there are no truth making reasons for L, and that it is epistemic. I have just given examples showing how L is epistemic, and how if we do not assume it, no reasons could be given for it, because all possible reasons for L pre-suppose L. The only way I would ever be contrastively arbitrary in this belief is if someone were to show that there were truth-making reasons for it, or that it is not epistemic. So, my challenger must show that the law is not presupposed in all reasons given for it, and that there is some reason givable for it, which does not employ it. This is an intentional possibility, but (as a matter of commentary) an extensional impossibility.

Conclusion and Elucidation

As I stated in the introduction and summary of Klein's argument, I have now presented an alternative notion of the kind of arbitrariness that ought to be avoided. Namely, contrastive arbitrariness. It is obvious that if we were to combine contrastive arbitrariness with PAC it would not necessitate that there are an infinite and non-repeating number of reasons in order to have justified belief. Rather, it would only entail that at any given time, we have better and non-repeating reasons for holding our beliefs rather than not. There are two key observations to be made about this. First, all justification is provisional, that is, there is a possibility of better reasons being discovered and that S will have to deny some former belief in light of this. Second, it is

not inconsistent with there being an infinite number of reasons to believe things. That is a possibility, but it is not necessary for justification. The infinitist's conclusion that there must be an infinite and non-repeating number of reasons if we are to be at all justified is strange, and merits scrutiny. If we can avoid it while asserting a kind of provisionalism then we are better off. My version of foundationalism is still provisional, I could turn out to be wrong, and reject that some beliefs are foundational if better reasons are shown for me not to believe that. I do not think that there are such reasons, at least not for the law of non-contradiction. This provisionalism is why I label my version of foundationalism "skeptical." Aikin has also addressed a skeptical foundationalism¹⁰, but takes a different tack than I do.

One point that can be further clarified concerning my argument that L is a foundational belief is that giving a meta-justification for a belief as a reason to believe *that b is foundational*, or giving a meta-justificatory argument for a standard of foundational beliefs does not disqualify the belief from being foundational. It is foundational if it satisfies the given conditions. Satisfying those conditions and giving arguments to show that it does satisfy those conditions, does not disqualify it as a foundational belief. Due to my definition of foundational beliefs, the conditions given that must be satisfied for the foundational belief to be foundational are not prior to, or independent of the belief itself. My criterion for a belief being foundational is also not a truth-making reason for the foundational belief itself. It is a reason to believe that some belief is foundational, not that the foundational belief is true.

¹⁰ Aikin, Scott F. 2007. "Prospects for Skeptical Foundationalism" *Metaphilosophy* 38 no. 5.

Given the very narrow nature of this argument the prospects for my account might not be very rich. My hypothesis might not be fruitful, if we are to use scientific terminology. Especially given that the only foundational belief I have as of yet given is the law of non-contradiction. I think that more work can be done, and that some of the projects I outlined, if carried out, would be very fruitful. A rigorous analysis of arbitrariness and circularity would be profitable, and possibly expand the number and clarify the criteria for foundational beliefs. Also, that a criterion for foundational beliefs can be given by this definition of foundational beliefs, without their ceasing to be foundational is a valuable insight. Of course, I could be wrong, but until better reasons can be given to show some flaw in my system, I feel justified in believing that the law of non-contradiction is a foundational belief, and that I am justified in believing it.

References

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Aikin, Scott F. 2008. "Meta-Epistemology and the varieties of epistemic infinitism" *Synthese* no. 163:175-185.

Further Reading

Aikin, Scott F. 2007. "Prospects for Skeptical Foundationalism" *Metaphilosophy* 38 no. 5.

Aikin, Scott F. 2005. "Who's Afraid of Epistemology's Regress Problem?" *Philosophical Studies* 126 no. 2:191-217.